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SUBJECT: TAJIK TIP COMMISSION: EVOLVING DESPITE A SOVIET DINOSAUR

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Recent meetings on Trafficking in Persons (TIP) highlighted progress the Government of Tajikistan (GOTI) is making in fighting TIP, and the barriers -- mainly organizational and intellectual -- that impede progress. The GOTI's Inter-Ministerial Commission on Combating TIP is developing a victim referral mechanism and can explain and defend Tajikistan's TIP fighting record in some detail. But dominating the commission is a Deputy Foreign Minister who embodies the Soviet mentality that denial is the best policy. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On November 17, at an OSCE roundtable, high-ranking members of the Inter-Ministerial Commission on Combating TIP presented the recommendations of six Tajik officials who recently travelled to Serbia and Macedonia to study anti-TIP policies and victim referral mechanisms. The OSCE's Anti-Trafficking Officer praised Tajikistan's efforts in combating TIP and said the Commission was working hard to make further progress. The Ministry of Labor's International Department Chief, Yahyo Vahobov, said the Commission would work to improve coordination on TIP policy within the Tajik government and establish a functioning victim referral mechanism, based on best practices discussed in meetings with Serbian and Macedonian government officials, NGOs, and law enforcement bodies.

¶3. (SBU) Deputy Minister of Justice Azamat Izomov conceded that the government needed to improve its partnerships with NGOs in assisting victims and executing public information campaigns. Though the government worked with the NGO "Modar" to disseminate TIP information from 2006-2008, the public outreach campaign ended when Modar closed due to lack of funding. Izomov called for new partnerships with NGOs to launch further outreach. After touting the Commission's efforts to combat TIP, Izomov said Tajikistan needed to do a better job reporting its positive steps to the international community. "We have difficulty advertising our work outside Tajikistan, so some think we are not doing anything."

¶4. (SBU) The Secretary of the Commission, Ahtam Abdulloev, briefed Poloff separately on the government's efforts to combat forced child labor during the cotton harvest. Abdulloyev, who is concurrently a senior official in the Presidential Apparatus, said the government was strictly enforcing the President's April order forbidding local officials from using forced child labor. Embassy contacts in Sughd and Khatlon Oblasts confirm that officials have not cancelled school to deploy children in the 2009 harvest, as was the case in 2008. However, young children

continue to work in the cotton harvest outside of school hours to earn extra money. In Sughd and Khatlon Oblasts, authorities have directed government employees, including doctors and teachers, to pick cotton for up to 15 days as "volunteers" in lieu of their regular duties for their standard salaries. In some cases, these employees have hired day-laborers to work in the fields on their behalf.

15. (SBU) While the Government of Tajikistan clearly has gotten religion in some quarters concerning TIP and forced labor, a November 5 meeting with the Commission Against Trafficking in Persons, which has lacked a Director since January, highlighted some intellectual obstacles that members of the government must overcome to more effectively deal with TIP. Commission Chair Deputy Foreign Minister Abdullo Yuldashev thanked the USG for its interest in TIP in Tajikistan, but then began to speak about how much the situation in Tajikistan had improved, and the lack of appreciation among foreigners for this. Apparently enjoying himself, he suggested that foreign diplomats spent their time in discos without appreciating that such diversions did not exist a decade ago. Yuldashev said "we should not waste money on seminars and training" but should instead devote all resources to job creation. "When people are busy they won't be as interested in departing. Let's not spend money on a conference. Let's open a sewing shop with twenty machines. By doing that, we can save twenty women from slavery."

16. (SBU) Getting back on topic, Yuldashev outlined the MFA's efforts to support Tajik migrants abroad. In Dubai, it increased consular staff to three officers -- a relatively large presence for Tajikistan. "We are trying to track living conditions in Russia, but it is not easy. The President meets

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with Tajik workers in countries he visits." In Moscow, the Tajik Migration Agency increased staff to 13, and the MFA appointed Honorary Consuls in Kaliningrad and Archangelsk. The Inter-Agency Commission's report on TIP states that the government, in cooperation with International Organizations, facilitated the return of 22 victims of trafficking from July 2008 to June 2009. Yuldashev lamented that it was difficult to prevent girls from "getting into bad situations" abroad because exit visas are not required to depart Tajikistan.

17. (SBU) Asked about the government's efforts to stop forced labor in the cotton fields, Yuldashev at first expressed surprise that cotton labor was connected to TIP. Then he extolled the collectivist tradition of the Tajik cotton harvest. "We have gathered cotton for 3,000 years, since the time of Zarathustra. It is part of our tradition. Everyone is involved, not forced." He defended child participation in the harvest. "Gathering cotton is not harsh labor. It was a holiday under socialism." Told that forced labor remained a major concern to the USG, Yuldashev insisted that "None of the institutions in Dushanbe, Kurgan-Teppe, or Kulyab have sent their students to the fields after the President's Address to Parliament" in which Rahmon ordered officials to cease employment of child labor in the cotton harvest. "The government has solved this, to the detriment of students who want to earn money."

18. (SBU) Emboffs raised the issue of ensuring that allegations of mistreatment of returned TIP victims are properly investigated noting the still unresolved questions about three returned trafficking victims who allegedly were assaulted by members of the Committee on National Security (GKNB) in 2008. Yuldashev impatiently (and revealingly) commented "This type of case does not rise to the level of our international relations,"

and that the allegations were "a lot of noise." A GKNB officer present said the case was investigated and that "the charges were groundless," but would not elaborate on the mechanism used to conduct the investigation or answer any other questions related to the case.

¶9. (SBU) Yuldashev said answers to any of the Embaffs' additional questions were included in the Commission's Report on TIP. The Embassy requested a copy of this report on June 16, after the Commission announced its completion. On October 29, the Embassy received the 39-page report, in Tajik. At the time of the November 5 meeting, Embassy staff had been able to translate only a brief summary of the report. When Embaffs noted they had not had time to translate the full report, but would like to discuss specific questions that the report might answer, Yuldashev seized the opportunity to stop the meeting. He ordered those around him to answer no further questions from the U.S. side, telling Embaffs to "learn the contents of the report" before any further discussions would take place. The meeting ended on this sour note.

¶10. (SBU) After further review of their report, post has found that it answers few of the questions posed by the State Department. Post has sent an unofficial translation of the report to G/TIP by email.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: There are positives and negatives in our recent interactions with the TIP commission. The Anti-Trafficking Commission has focused significant political attention to TIP issues and cooperated with the USG and other partners on program implementation. It is significant that, despite Yuldashev's personal view that cotton harvesting is "not harsh labor," officials did not deploy students to the fields during the 2009 harvest. The appointment of a senior official from the President's apparatus to serve as Commission secretary and enforce the ban on forced child labor signals the government's eagerness to make progress on TIP, if only to improve its TIER 2-Watchlist status. Tajikistan's efforts to assist trafficking victims in Dubai and Russia are also positive and are possibly an area for greater USG engagement. The lack of comprehension of our concerns about TIP shown by Yuldashev is a manifestation of the persistent and strong influence of Soviet attitudes in the government; some prefer denial to engagement on difficult issues which require reform and self-criticism. END COMMENT
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